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Sea And Shore

Gurnet Light

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Massachusetts has two minor peninsulas extending north and south into the sea between Scituate and Plymouth near Brant Rock, Marshfield, and Green Harbor. The northern one, which includes Humarock Beach, terminates at Scituate's Fourth Cliff. The other, of which Duxbury Beach is a part, reaches far to the south along the great stretch of sand dunes which end at the Gurnet.

On a high bluff at the southern tip of the Gurnet, looking out across lower Massachusetts Bay, stands Gurnet Light. First established as a station back in 1768 by the Massachusetts legislature, the lighthouse is on historic land and much of interest has taken place there.

During the Revolution, the light itself was hit by a cannonball. And long before, in 1606, Champlain had landed here and made an interesting sketch of Plymouth Harbor for his chart of the coast.

For many years, the Pilgrims called the land "the gurnett's nose" according to lighthouse historian Willoughby Winsor, the antiquarian of Duxbury, tells us there were about "27 acres of good soil" there.

Incidentally, the name "Gurnet" probably came from one of several similar headlands in the English channel, many of them called the Gurnet after the fish of the same name, which is caught in great numbers along the coast of Devonshire.

In the legislative records of the Governor's Council in the Province of Massachusetts for 1768, we read that a lighthouse was planned in that year to be erected on the eastern extremity of the long strip of land known as the Gurnet at the entrance to Plymouth Harbor.

An unusual arrangement was made with John and Hannah Thomas, owners of the land where the lighthouse was to be built, whereby the province would be allowed to erect and maintain a lighthouse on the Thomas property for the modest sum of five shillings a year!

The mention of a Keeper Thomas and later, his widow, would indicate that the Thomas family was appointed to run the light as part of their agreement with the province.

The lighthouse, constructed at a cost of 6,660 pounds, was 30 feet long, 20 feet high, and 15 feet wide, with a "lanthorn" at each end of the building, each lantern holding two lamps. It was here at Plymouth's Gurnet Light that, for the first time in America, the system of having two separate "twin" lights was begun.

During the Revolution, an unusual incident took place. The three towns of Plymouth, Duxbury and Kingston had erected a fort on the Gurnet. In the midst of an engagement between the fort and the British frigate Niger, which had gone aground on Brown's Bank, a wild shot from the ship pierced the lighthouse itself. The vessel soon got off the sandbar and escaped.

This incident of the cannonball hitting the lighthouse has been mistakenly attributed to two other Massachusetts lighthouses. At Boston Light, there is a small circular window in the tower, which local enthusiasts have claimed, erroneously, was caused by a cannonball.

And on Thatcher's Island off Cape Ann, some persons have insisted that one of the twin lights there was struck by a cannonball. As a matter of fact, Gurnet Light Station is the only Massachusetts lighthouse known to have been hit by an enemy cannonball.

A terrible shipwreck occurred near the Gurnet Light during the last week of 1778, when the armed brigantine General Arnold was caught in a blizzard. Although less than a mile from the friendly gleam of the Gurnet Light, Captain Magee anchored his vessel rather than risk the treacherous waters of Plymouth's inner harbor without a pilot.

The vessel dragged anchor and finally hit on White Flats. Before the survivors could eventually be rescued, 72 of the crew died, most of them by freezing to death in the below-zero temperature. Because of the ice-blocked harbor, the keeper of the Gurnet Light was unable to go to their aid, nor could the men of Plymouth reach them. Finally, a causeway was built out over the ice from Plymouth to rescue the survivors.

When Massachusetts ceded the Gurnet Light to the federal government in 1790, the keeper, Mrs. Hannah Thomas, was still active and receiving her yearly rental of five shillings, plus \$200 in pay.

The Gurnet Light was rebuilt in 1843. The structures were distinctive, their two high octagonal towers having the general appearance of Nix's Mate Beacon in Boston Harbor.

By 1871 the lights then in the twin towers were compared unfavorably to the lights of an ordinary dwelling house. A short time later the power of Gurnet Light was increased.

The Gurnet Light was an important beacon during the long period when Plymouth Harbor was a thriving seacoast port. Then commerce dropped off, and Plymouth lost most of its sea traffic. In 1914, however, the Cape Cod Canal brought the lighthouse back into importance as a coastal beacon between Boston and New York.

In 1924, the Northeast tower of the Gurnet Light was discontinued, closing a period of 156 years when twin lights had been the Gurnet characteristic.



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